

Opinion **Management**

Random selection for top jobs is not a crazy idea

Picking any candidate from a pre-screened talent pool works well — and boosts diversity

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Amanda Goodall 6 HOURS AGO

Have you become bored reading headlines that lament the absence of diversity at the top of organisations? My hands even feel heavy writing this now. We seem stuck in a diversity déjà vu. Yet this persistent gap in power is not only inequitable, it is also inefficient. Everyone is losing out.

To raise the number of women, black and minority ethnic people in leadership positions, radical change is needed. I am proposing the use of random selection from a pre-chosen pool of candidates for promotion into middle management.

Sounds extreme? Maybe. But think about conventional recruitment and promotion practices. They assume that the “best people will reach the top”. Yet many good candidates are often unwilling to throw their hat into the ring. Years of overt and covert discrimination can predispose women and minority candidates to be psychologically wary of entering competitions and more likely to suffer psychologically from failure or rejection. The willingness to compete for management and leadership roles requires self-confidence and a belief that the system is both fair and meritocratic.

On the demand side, recruiters are prone to biases and other irrationalities. Evidence from neuroscience shows that stereotype associations, which influence behaviour through unconscious biases, are hard to control. When candidates differ greatly in their characteristics, they are more difficult to compare. Research suggests that evaluations are then more likely to be implicitly influenced by prejudices, stereotypes and in-group favouritism.

In short, although decision makers are eager to select the most qualified candidate, they often fail to do so.

Some solutions address the supply side by trying, for example, to “fix the woman”. She is encouraged to “lean in” or “ask more” when in fact the evidence shows that women have been asking for higher pay and promotions, but just not getting them. In my experience the most ubiquitous form of bias comes through “homophily”, or selecting in your own image — often practised by people who are unaware of it. Homophily is evident on hiring panels, across management and in many social settings.

Random selection has a long history. Ancient Athens relied upon it as a political mechanism. Today, it chooses juries in Anglo-Saxon legal systems and is being considered to select judges in Switzerland’s highest court. I believe it should be applied to external recruitment and internal promotions.

The process would involve three stages. First, human resources will advertise a post and invite strong candidates to apply — not merely relying on the naturally confident. Recruiters may choose to announce at this initial point that the vacant post will, at the final stage, be filled by lot. In the second stage, the promotion panel draws up a list of candidates who meet various performance and other criteria. In stage three, the successful candidate is randomly picked from among this pre-chosen talent pool.

There are benefits to both diversity and efficiency from using random selection. The first advantage is that this procedure encourages new talent because homophily, and other selection biases, are reduced. Crucially, it also protects women and ethnic minorities against internalising failure, and reduces the propensity of winners to assume they are “the chosen one” and over-claim on their success.

Efficiency is also likely to be enhanced. A century ago, a Danish mathematician, Johan Jensen, explained one clever rationale for randomisation. It all stems from the power of averaging. Take the case of choosing line managers. Imagine they are being picked randomly out of a hat that is full of all the potentially qualified applicants. Averaging across the good and bad choices will come out well for the organisation if the really good candidates outweigh the negative influence of the duds.

We know that in the field of human performance, it is often the case that the very best people are extraordinarily valuable to an organisation — and yet at the interview stage those very people will often appear as risky hires to a selection panel.

The call from global corporations for diversity in management rings out, yet the landscape barely changes. We need to experiment, and some companies are ready to act. As the HR director at one London start-up told me: “We already use blind CV selection across the board and are open to exploring the possibility of adding random selection into our recruitment process.”

Why is it so important that we see our diverse selves in leadership positions? The FT’s [Oluwakemi Aladesuyi](#) answered this in an article remembering the talents of the late actor Chadwick Boseman. Recalling the experience of watching *Black Panther* with its majority black cast, she said she saw for the first time the importance of watching films with others: “To see a version of themselves, their questions, their struggles, reflected back at them on the big screen — and to not feel alone in that journey.” Ms Aladesuyi could have been talking about black leaders and managers in organisations.

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